Blacked out on a whim

There has been a furore in the newly created Telangana over allegedly biased reporting by two news channels, which have since been blockaded by cable operators in the state. C.S.H.N.MURTHY offers an alternative view to some of the arguments carried in The Hoot on this controversy. PIX: ABN MD replies to KCR on ban

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The recent blocking of two channels, TV9 and ABN-Andhra Jyothi, by Multi-System Operators (MSOs) in Telangana, on the grounds that they offended the sentiments of the people of Telangana and the members of its legislature, has been justified by some academics and media persons.

However, in reality the action of the MSOs was both illegal and worrying.

If the chief minister and the legislators of Telangana, were offended by the parody, The Bullet News, transmitted by TV 9 on the night of June 12, 2014, and recommended stringent action against the channel, they were no doubt legally entitled to take this approach. On the other hand, the MSOs did not have the consent of the subscribers to block the channels. Nor did they possess any legal right to do so since they are just media marketers, or intermediaries between the viewing/paying audience and the media houses. No provision under the Cable Television (Networks) Regulation Act, 1995 authorizes them to resort to such arm-twisting tactics.

On June 17, 2014, the owner-editor of ABN -Andhra-Jyothi, Vemuri Radhakrishna wrote an open letter in his newspaper to the chief minister of Telangana, K Chandrasekhar Rao (KCR), questioning the authority of the MSOs to violate the freedom of speech granted to the media under article 19 (1)a of the Indian Constitution. He critiqued the chief minister for resorting, as he alleged, to such tactics through the MSOs instead of operating through established processes of the law.

Radhakrishna's anger is understandable for his channel ABN-Andhra Jyothi did not transmit any programme criticizing or making insinuations against the MLAs of Telangana. Secondly, the

state legislature passed a resolution to prosecute TV9 but did not pass any such resolution against ABN-Andhra Jyothi. Furthermore, it is a dangerous situation, indeed, if MSOs are allowed to function as extra-constitutional authorities regulating freedom of speech. Should they be deciding whether a particular channel's transmission has infringed the rights or honour of the people of a particular region, and its legislators?

If one were to go by some points made on The Hoot by Jagadeeswara Rao, Padmaja Shaw and Madabhushi Sridhar, it would appear that the action of the MSOs was a 'tit for tat' action against an errant media, for two reasons: firstly, the media owners were from the Seemandhra region, and secondly these media houses -- TV 9 and ABN-Andhra Jyothi -- did not give proper coverage to the Telangana agitation during the last five years.

The second statement is factually incorrect. Both TV 9 and ABN-Andhra Jyothi gave minute to minute coverage of all the agitations launched by the Telangana Joint Action Council, besides supporting the cause of the Telangana agitation, and its legitimate aspirations. Radhakrishna mentioned this in his open letter to KCR.

Linking the origins of the media owners and 'partisan coverage' by them is untenable when we live in what is often described as a global village. Secondly, have not all the Hyderabad based television channels become the media of the state of Telangana? Thirdly, does Reliance not have a stake in a regional channel, ETV? How can one link bias to the origins of the owners, when the owners of a single television channel may be from different regions?

The oft heard complaint is that the speeches of KCR have been 'misquoted' by the media houses from the 'Seemandhra' region. But KCR is a provocative speaker and his statements do often generate adverse comments among the media. So why accuse just two media channels of 'slanting/biased' reporting or 'sensationalisation'? Nor should we forget that 'sensationalisation' and 'slanted reporting', are the bane of all media, since they generate TRPs.

I invite those who brand TV9 and ABN-Andhra Jyothi --- which have, incidentally, critiqued the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) several times -- as pro-TDP, to identify a television channel across Andhra Pradesh, or even India, that is non-partisan?

Is not partisanship the forte of Sakshi for the last seven years? Is it not the strength of Telangana (T) television channel or TNN channel? Are not certain television channels, such as TV 5, NTV, V6, and Express TV in Andhra Pradesh, supporting YS Jaganmohan Reddy through an orchestrated mudslinging campaign against the present Andhra Pradesh chief minister Chandrababu Naidu?

Apart from political news and parodies, a TV channel offers much else. Thus TV9 and ABN-Andhra Jyothi offer a number of programmes beyond politics. Even in terms of coverage of news, both the channels have the resources to break news stories faster than other channels. Just because these channels have offended the chief minister and legislators of Telangana, MSOs should not be allowed to act as surrogate law enforcement agents. It is dangerous portent that does not augur well for democratic governance.

The owner-editor of ABN-Andhra Jyothi has filed a writ petition in the High Court of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh seeking action against the MSOs, and the Union Minister for Information and Broadcasting, Prakash Javadekar, has written a letter to the governor of Telangana, requesting him to intervene in the matter, and ensure the restoration of the transmission of these two television channels. However, at the time of writing, the blockade continues.

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